

Government Policy Toward Teaching Religion in State Schools
Précis

Oxford Round Table
Religion, Education and the Role of Government

Presented by Ronnie W. Rogers
August 18, 2004

To the Oxford Round Table meeting at
St. Antony's College
University of Oxford
Oxford England

A more comprehensive development
of the ideas and documentation
is contained in the paper.

© 2004
Ronnie W. Rogers

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the government has an obligation to teach religion in state schools. The appropriateness of such a policy is based upon history, sociology, and epistemology, and will conclude with a proposal of four principles for teaching religion.

Religion is defined as “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe.... something one believes in and follows devotedly.” This encompasses both ‘supernatural’ and ‘non-supernatural’ religions like humanism and naturalism.

With a proper understanding of religion, it becomes clear that teaching religion in school is inevitable. David Sant notes, “All education is undergirded by presuppositions about the origin of the universe, the origin of man, the purpose of man, ethics of governing relationships between men, and the continuing existence of the universe in an orderly and predictable manner. It is an inescapable fact that all of these basic assumptions are fundamentally religious.” Moreover, considering the religious features of psychology and its significance in modern education further substantiates the religious nature of modern education. Consequently, what seems to be lacking in state education is, more precisely, accurate and substantive teaching concerning supernatural religion.

THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR TEACHING RELIGION:

It is constitutionally compatible

The founders of America believed education must include religion since religion was essential for morality, and morality was essential for a republic form of government. President George Washington in his farewell address wrote, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.... And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”

“The very year the Constitution was written...and approved by Congress, that same body of Congress passed the famous Northwest Ordinance.” Article 3 says, “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” The founders believed in what Benjamin Franklin referred to as the “fundamental points in all sound religion.” John Adams referred to these tenets as the “general principles” on which the American civilization had been founded. Thomas Jefferson said of these, “in which God has united us all.” Commenting on the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, Jefferson declared, “A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen.” They wanted these religious fundamentals “taught in the public schools along with morality and knowledge.” Jefferson said, “Their minds [are] to be informed by education what is right and what is wrong, to be encouraged in habits of virtue...” He wrote a bill for Virginia schools that emphasized these principles, saying, “No religious reading, instruction or exercise shall be prescribed or practiced inconsistent with the tenets of any religious sect or denomination.” The prominence of religion in public education in the

U.S. is further evidenced by the use of the Bible and the overtly Christian McGuffey's Readers as textbooks.

It is ethically demanded

Ignoring or minimizing the role of religion in the development of the ideas of man, cultures, behaviors, and world progress distorts history. For example, while most have heard of the Pilgrims, they don't know that they were actually a local church and took their name from the Bible (1 Peter 2:11) because they were "wanderers in search of a new homeland." After being persecuted by civil authorities, suffering robbery and imprisonment, they fled from England to Holland and finally headed "for the new world" in quest of religious freedom. Before disembarking in New England, they drew up and signed what is known as the Mayflower Compact. It was the first governing document—constitution—of the settlers. It says in part, "We, whose names are underwritten...having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honor of our King and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the presence of God...covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic...."

Dr. M.E. Bradford demonstrates that the vast majority of those who signed the Constitution of the United States were professing Christians and "99.8 percent of the people in America in 1776 claimed to be Christians." Additionally, the Bible was the most widely quoted source in their political writings...accounting for 34% of all quotations....

In spite of the profound influence of Christianity upon the forging of the United States of America, William J. Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, poignantly notes, "In too many places in American public education, religion has been ignored, banned, or shunned in ways that serve neither knowledge, nor the Constitution, nor sound public policy. There is no good curricular or constitutional reason for textbooks to ignore, as many do, the role of religion in the founding of this country or its prominent place in the lives of many of its citizens. We should acknowledge that religion—from the Pilgrims to the civil rights struggle—is an important part of our history, civics, literature, art, music, poetry, and politics, and we should insist that our schools tell the truth about it." Diane Ravitch, educational historian, notes that as a result of bias guidelines used by various publishers "reading passages must not contain even an 'incidental reference' to anyone's religion."

"Dr. Paul Vitz, an educational psychologist, completed a study for the National Institute of Education to determine if public school textbooks were biased or censored. He concluded... 'Religion...[has] been reliably excluded from children's textbooks.' There was almost a total blackout on Christianity in America beyond the colonial period... [He found] a text that had 30 pages on the Pilgrims, but not one word that even mentioned their religion..."

THE SOCIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR TEACHING RELIGION

Even though understanding religion is essential for comprehending contemporary society, religion is often marginalized, ignored, or explained reductively. Consider the following:

Sociological deconstruction of religious faith

Robert Bellah, a social scientist, delineates the underlying assumptions of social scientists as, "...positivism, reductionism, relativism, and determinism....Religion, being unscientific, could have no reality claim in any case, though as a private belief or practice it may by some be admitted to be psychologically helpful for certain people...."

When sociology portrays religion as merely the "product of individual choices," the importance of religion in peoples' lives, cultural shifts, and on the world stage becomes enshrouded in reductivism.

State school's hostility toward religious faith

These biases reduce religion to merely a human construct, thereby denigrating religion and religious people. Stephen L. Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University said, "On America's elite campuses, today, it is perfectly acceptable for professors to use their classrooms to attack religion, to mock it, to trivialize it, and to refer to those to whom faith truly matters as dupes, and dangerous fanatics on top of it."

Huston Smith, retired professor at Berkley, commented, "This is the kind of misreading of science that...belittles art [and] religion...." He further states, "The modern university is not agnostic toward religion; it is actively *hostile* to it" (italics added). Sociologist Allan Wolfe admits, "I am not...a person of faith," but adds, "...nor do I write out of the kind of hostility to religion that has characterized so many academics...."

Psychological misdiagnosis of religious faith

David Larson of Duke University Medical School draws attention to similar biases in the mental health professions. "Consider The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual...third edition, *religious examples were used only as illustration in discussions of mental illness, such as delusions, incoherence, and illogical thinking*" (italics added).

Another example is the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory* where "All the positive religion-connected traits...are weighted negatively...Conversely, several traits that religious people would regard as diminishing themselves...are weighted positively."

Religion viewed as illustrative of and leading to mental illness devalues religion to nothing more than a privatized preoccupation, devoid of objective reality as well as public, educational, cultural, or legal value, and thereby banished from intellectual and legal culture.

Legal curtailments of religious expression

In 1947, *Everson v. Board of Education*, “the Supreme Court applied the establishment clause to the states for the first time...imbued...with a firm separationist reading.” Hugo Black unjustifiably elevated Jefferson’s ‘wall of separation’ “to [an] authoritative gloss on the First Amendment religion provisions.” The de-historicizing of this metaphor has obscured its original meaning, and thereby reconceptualized the First Amendment. Jefferson used that phrase in a letter responding to the Danbury Baptist Association to assure them of his commitment to religious freedom. However, Roger Williams, a clergyman, staunch advocate of religious freedom, and the “founder of Rhode Island” used the phrase before Jefferson. The theological basis for a ‘wall of separation’ grew out of his understanding of the church being based upon the New Testament rather than the Old Testament. “Drawing upon the analogy of Eden, he spoke of the church or community of the faithful as a garden. Beyond its bounds lay the wilderness of the sinful world from which the garden was preserved by a *wall of separation*. Should the *wall be breached, weeds from the wilderness would invade the garden and choke off its flowers*” (italics added).

That the wall was to protect the church and man’s conscience from the government rather than the government from influence of religion is further demonstrated by the following: Williams served as the President of Rhode Island for three years beginning in 1654. He believed the Quaker’s pacifism would make them poor governors. “Williams himself linked religion to morals, and he expected magistrates in Rhode Island to enforce the second table of the Ten Commandments.” Moreover, the whole debate between Williams and John Cotton concerning the relationship of the church and state was theological; therefore, the influence of religious values upon government was never the intent of the metaphor. Williams never believed that a Christian left his morals or Christianity in the garden when he went into the wilderness. (Matthew 5:13-16; 28:18-20). Although, Christianity is very personal, it is remarkably public as well (Matthew 10:16).

Since Williams believed that the second table of the Ten Commandments was appropriate for civil law, but the first table was not, it seems that his message was that, the ‘wall of separation’ would be breached if the church and state were to become so intertwined that the state passes laws regarding the first tablet, which required observance or punishment by the state. For Williams, this would be the bloody persecution of conscience; whereas Jefferson’s ‘wall,’ in light of his practice as governor, communication with the Baptists, and his second inaugural address clearly symbolized a jurisdictional understanding based on federalism and freedom of conscience. Thus, whether one looks at Williams, the Baptists, or Jefferson, the theist is free to follow God both privately and publicly, and the atheist is free not to.

Cultural hostility is unwarranted

The current hostility seems to be unjustified in light of religion’s prevalence in and benefits to culture. For example, Gallup Polls indicate that 83% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, 2% as Jewish and 10% say, “they have no religious preference.” Research suggests that “intrinsic” religion has positive results in the areas of happiness, sense of well-being, lowering stress, better personal relationships, greater sexual

satisfaction for women, lower risk of cardiovascular diseases, longer life for the poor; it affects blood pressure, and different cancers; decreases illegitimacy, crime, delinquency, welfare dependency, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, suicide and enhances general overall mental, physical and social well-being.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS FOR TEACHING RELIGION

Epistemology answers the questions of what we can know and how can we know. If our epistemic approach to education is inadequate, learning will be unnecessarily deficient. Several ideas appear to have negatively impacted teaching religion in state schools.

First, **emphasizing pedagogy more than content.** “The percentage of teachers with an undergraduate degree in a subject area fell from 28 percent to 23 percent between 1983 and 2003.... Only 16 percent of eighth-grade teachers in their first ten years of teaching say they evaluate students on whether or not the student gets the right answer.” This hinders intellectual development and concomitantly minimizes teaching about religion. Rousseau’s *Emile* has served as the classic exemplar of this non-directive approach. Diane Ravitch remarks, “The flight from knowledge and content in the past generation has harmed our children and diminished our culture....”

Second, **expanding science beyond its domanial authority.** Science as the exclusive arbitrator of truth creates what Huston Smith refers to as ‘scientism.’ “Scientism adds to science two corollaries: first, that the scientific method is, if not the *only* reliable method of getting at truth, then at least the *most* reliable method; and second, that the things science deals with—material entities—are the most fundamental things that exist.... Unsupported by facts, they are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst merely opinions.” This domanial transgression stealthily transforms science into naturalism.

Third, **discounting the place of faith in education.** While religious faith is often summarily dismissed in light of ‘real knowledge,’ faith in naturalism is welcomed. For example, the U.S. National Association of Biology Teachers statement reads “the diversity of life on earth is the outcome of evolution: an *unsupervised, impersonal*....and natural process...” (italics added). Of course it is impossible for science to declare that evolution is *unsupervised* and *impersonal*. Further, almost all learning requires faith. Until one has stood in Lady Margaret Hall, he accepts its existence by faith. As Robert Bork points out, “A belief that science will ultimately explain everything, however, also requires a leap of faith. Faith in science requires the unproven assumption that all reality is material, that there is nothing beyond or outside the material universe. Perhaps that is right...but it cannot be proven and therefore rests on an untested and untestable assumption. That being the case, there is no logical reason why science should be hostile to or displace religion.”

Fourth, **overestimating the possibility of value-neutral education.** Ronald Nash remarks, “There is a sense in which education is an activity that is religious at its roots. Any effort to remove religion from education is merely the substitution of one set of ultimate religious commitments for another.” With regard to values clarification, Paul

Vitz notes that while the theorists do not allow for one value to be better than another they certainly believe their way of determining values is better than others, “that is, relativity aside, students *should* prize their model of how to clarify values.”

Fifth, **underestimating the biases in science.** Science is not without its biases and breaches of ethics. Alexander Kohn, professor of Virology at Tel Aviv Medical School points out, “Breaches of ethics as encountered in scientific research cover a whole spectrum ranging from outright fraud... to...negligence” [and] “experimenter bias.” Ruth Hubbard states, “The pretense that science is objective, apolitical and value-neutral is profoundly political.” Kohn notes at times, “Dubious evidence is strengthened by strong *hope*; anomalies are fitted into a coherent picture with the help of cultural *bias*” (italics added). The harsh reality is that we are all biased, and if we are not objective about our biases, we can have no hope of objectivity elsewhere.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING RELIGION IN STATE SCHOOLS

The emphasis should be to teach the *facts of religion not faith in religion.* A joint statement by a diverse group including the NEA, the Christian Coalition and 22 other education associations and religious groups stated, “Public schools...must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect...[and] ensure that the curriculum includes study about religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education.”

This must include substantive teaching concerning dissimilarities as well as similarities. The National Council for Social Studies Curriculum Standards declares: “Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity. Knowledge of religious *differences* and the role of religion in the contemporary world can help promote understanding and alleviate prejudice” (italics added).

In order to accurately teach about a particular religion, textbooks and teachers will be well served by utilizing scholarly information derived from the subgroups within the religion. In addition, they will need to be trained how to teach religion in a constitutionally compatible manner.

The amount of teaching on religion should be based on *proportionality not equality.* Mentioning a certain religion, or group within a religion, should be proportional to: the significance it played in the event or lives of people under consideration; the need for the specific subject being taught; and the grade level of the students. This is in contrast to the multiculturalism and political correctness emphasis on equal portrayal rather than factual proportionality. Ravitch asserts, “The textbooks published in the late 1990s...[are] a story of cultural equivalence.” This leaves students with a distorted idea that religion played a minimal role, no role, or that many religions played an equal role in events and cultural development.

The context for teaching religion should be one of *accommodation not separation*.

The question of teaching about religion is no longer “Should I teach about religion” but rather “How do I teach about religion?” This proposal would replace the tendency toward separation with a conscious objective to include the teaching of religion in public education. The fear that accommodation results in promotion is unjustified.

The approach should be one of *constructiveness not destructiveness*. Constructivism gives due attention to what the religion’s adherents believe their religion to be. This does not mean that weakness or abuses are not taught, but rather that they are explained in a manner befitting of education without being used to reduce religion to a cultural construct or an antiquated belief superceded by scientific naturalism. In addition, the problems associated with a religion are dealt with in proportion to the history of the religion as well as in light of the historical setting and their primary documents.

Therefore, the state has a professional and ethical obligation to include proportional teaching on religion in state schools.